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ABSTRACT

To discover whether high schools and colleges were following the 1971 guidelines on the use of rank in class (RIC) in college admissions decisions, the National Association of Secondary School Principals surveyed 257 public and private secondary schools and 126 public and private colleges across the nation. The survey questionnaire sought data on school practices relative to the RIC guidelines, the need for new guidelines, preferences for RICs or grade point averages, the role of RICs in admissions decisions, the form of reporting RICs, and both the proportion of courses and students counted and the weighting of different courses in computing RICs. The results show that no new guidelines are needed, that the present guidelines are being used, that RICs are still popular in admissions decision-making, that most schools count all students and courses in computing RICs, that many assign higher weights to the more academic courses in figuring a student's RIC, and that most schools prefer the traditional method of reporting RIC. A list of the twelve 1971 guidelines is attached. (EW)

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Rank-In-Class--Another Look at the Guidelines

From 1971 to 1981

NASSP last surveyed school and college rank-in-class practices in 1971. Based on that survey, conducted with the help of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers (AACRAO), a series of guidelines was formulated and recommended to secondary schools for use in developing or revising local RIC policies and practices. Schools of all types and sizes have found those guidelines for the most part appropriate and helpful.

Nonetheless, changes in the college enrollment picture during the decade suggested that the "fit" of the guidelines may not be as snug in 1981 as it was in 1971. Furthermore, some questions have been raised about the interpretation of a few of the recommendations along with occasional questioning of a recommended practice or policy.

These considerations prompted NASSP's School-College Relations Committee to assess the part that RIC plays today and to consider whether or not another comprehensive study of RIC practices was needed, or if, at most, some revisions or extensions of the earlier recommendations were called for. This Curriculum Report discusses what came to light when this probe was carried out.

Sampling 1981 Policies and Practices

The College Sample An inquiry was sent to the admission directors of about 125 of the four-year institutions that provided information in 1971. In addition, a number of participants in a workshop of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors completed the inquiry form. These sources provided 126 responses--59 from public institutions and 67 from private, ranging in undergraduate enrollment from fewer than 1,000 to more than 20,000 students, and located in all parts of the United States.

The 126 colleges and universities do not comprise the "representative sample" which careful researchers try to obtain, but they do seem to be a safe sample for making some generalizations about present-day collegiate practices in using RIC to make admissions decisions.

The information requested of college admissions officers was much the same as that gathered 10 years ago: the questions asked can be inferred from the tables. However, two differences between the 1971 and the 1981 inquiries should be noted: (1) This year

EA 014 189

admissions officers were in several instances asked to indicate a preference among a number of options; and (2) They were queried about the acceptability of certain variations from their basic RIC practices.

The Secondary School Sample Schools that contributed to the 1971 study were also used in constructing the 1981 study sample. About 275 high schools were selected from that earlier listing, distributed throughout NASSP's seven membership regions. That sample-of-a-sample did include a number of nonpublic schools. But to make certain that such schools--which for the most part have a college-prep orientation--were adequately represented, NAIS was asked to name a group of independent schools to whom a questionnaire could be sent. The final mailing list included 327 public and nonpublic secondary schools. The 257 responses received provide the data discussed as this report continues.

In the tables the data have been categorized on the basis of school type (public, 202 schools; nonpublic, 55 schools).

Much of the four-page school inquiry form was used to list the 12 major guidelines resulting from the 1971 study, with the request that the school indicate, with respect to each of the 12, whether or not that guideline described the school's present practice. If the response was "No" in a particular instance, the school was asked to describe the present practice, and explain why it is followed. The guidelines, in the form presented in the questionnaire, are listed at the end of this CR.

School people were also encouraged to recommend any changes they considered desirable in the present guidelines, and to identify other issues they would like to see addressed by additional guidelines.

The Main Questions with Answers

It is accepted practice in detective-story writing to conceal the identity of the bad guy until the last chapter. Most research reporting is laid out the same way: a question, a study plan, tabulated data, and finally--after readers have had an opportunity (rarely seized) to come to their own conclusions--the researcher reveals his or her conclusion. In this instance, however, it was decided to break with that tradition and go directly to answers to the two major questions that stimulated this probe, with some corroborating evidence to follow.

Question: Have changes in college-admissions practices in the last decade, particularly with respect to the part that rank-in-class plays, been substantial or significant enough to justify a repeat of the comprehensive 1971 study at this time?

Conclusion: No, and no such comprehensive study is being recommended. There have been changes, and they should be considered. However, this seems possible without undertaking another large data-gathering effort.

Question: Is the list of RIC guidelines recommended in 1971 still applicable in 1981, or are there revisions or additions that ought to be made to bring that list up-to-date?

Conclusion: To judge by the substantial extent to which the 1971 recommendations are reflected in current school practices, they continue to provide good advice for school policy making. Only two of guidelines--one having to do with the weighting of marks, the other with the suggested form for reporting class

rank--are followed by fewer than half the schools in the sample. Those two will be considered in detail later in this discussion, as will be two others--what courses and what students, if any, should be excluded from ranking computations--which seem to need a bit of clarification.

Moreover, no suggestions were offered for additional issues to be covered by new recommendations, although an occasional proposal for revision did appear. The most frequent response to the questions about change in or additions to the guidelines was "None."

Now let us take a closer look at some of the information provided by schools and colleges that led to these conclusions.

Rank-in-Class Popular as Ever

Of primary interest in deciding whether or not the last 10 years have seen any significant changes in the importance of RIC is the extent to which colleges and universities still value that statistic in making admissions decisions, and concomitantly what schools are doing in 1981 about providing that information.

In the 1971 study, about 85 percent of the contributing four-year colleges and universities reported they used rank-in-class, alone or with grade point average, in making their admissions decisions. It is evident from the present study that the frequency of RIC remains at about the same level.

About a third of both the private and the public colleges in the sample said they required class rank on all transcripts, with almost all the rest requesting it. This is no doubt viewed as a minor difference by most school counselors.

To find out how serious they are about that requirement or request, colleges that make some use of RIC were asked if they would be willing to accept GPA instead of class rank. The extent of that willingness--substantial, it appears--is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Percent of Colleges That Make Use of Rank-in-Class Willing To Accept Grade Point Average Instead

	Total Sample	Private Colleges	Public Colleges
Willing To Accept	60%	69%	49%
Not Willing	32	24	41
No response	09	07	10
(N=126)		67	59

To be sure, that flexibility may not be quite as great as the figures suggest inasmuch as several admissions officers remarked, "We'll take GPA if need be, but we much prefer RIC when we can get it." Nevertheless, this is but one of several signs to be noted as this discussion proceeds--there is more "give" in college practices with respect to rank-in-class than school personnel often recognize.

Of course, 95 percent of secondary schools today, much as 10 years ago, compute class rank for their students so colleges are likely to get ranks for most of their applicants whether they require or request that information. Because class ranks are so widely accepted as a normal and, probably, necessary part of school life by students, parents,

and the general public, the high percentage is entirely predictable. (In 1971, the corresponding figure for the sample as a whole was 97%.)

But impressive as those figures are as descriptors of school practice, those who have chosen not to follow this practice have their considerable significance: A minority of administrators of secondary schools, both public and nonpublic, have decided that their students are better served if academic ranks are not computed and that, furthermore, their students are little inconvenienced by the lack of this statistic in their college applications. It may be easier to follow this course in schools where almost all graduates go on to four-year colleges. Probably such schools deal regularly with a group of colleges that have come to know and understand how those schools evaluate their students' academic performance. But this decision can also be made by other schools, both public and independent.

RIC and Admissions Decisions

In spite of the long and often irritating custom of figuring rank-in-class--if, how, for whom--it remains relevant to ask how colleges use this information about applicants and what it means in the making of their admissions decisions. For years studies have shown that academic performance in high school, summarized as RIC or GPA--is the single best predictor of academic success in the college freshman year. The most recent survey of this correlation and associated relationships was sponsored by AACRAO and the College Board and reported in Undergraduate Admissions, The Realities of Institutional Policies, Practices, and Procedures (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1980). A few of the data and some of the comments about admissions policies and practices of the 981 four-year institutions contributing to that survey are relevant to our study and are summarized here:

- 40 percent consider RIC or GPA the single most important factor in admissions decisions
- 82 percent consider RIC or GPA the single most important or very important factor in those decisions. (This figure for SAT, ACT, etc., is 58 percent.)
- "High school academic performance is the only qualification that a significant percentage of any college category reported to be the single most important factor....On the other hand, much greater proportions.../confirmed/ the presumption that college admissions decisions are typically based on several kinds of information...and that no single piece of information alone dictates the decisions."

The 1981 NASSP college inquiry asked for information about the major uses to which RIC and GPA were put. The responses for rank-in-class are summarized in Table 2; those for grade point average are much the same. The data therein are entirely consistent with the generalization from the AACRAO/CEEB study.

This table may not represent fully the extent of these uses because more than one option was checked by several colleges, and it is reasonable to believe that the same is true in other unreported instances. To illustrate the multiple options, a college may use RIC to define a cut-off base, but above that level use RIC along with other data in making a final decision. It was decided, though, to count only one response from a college, and to choose the one that seemed more restrictive; e.g., "cut-off base" rather than "along with other data."

The AACRAO/CEEB survey provides further reason for caution in jumping to conclusions from data like these. In that survey, 44 percent of the private and 33 percent of the four-year colleges said they had a minimum RIC requirement, averaging at about the

Table 2. Percent of Colleges and Universities Using Class Rank for Each of Several Purposes in Making Admissions Decisions

Uses of RIC in Admissions Decision Making	Total Group	Private Institutions	Public Institutions	By Type and Undergraduate Enrollment					
				Private		Public			
				-5M	5M+	-5M	5-10M	10-20M	20M+
In a prediction formula	22%	16%	28%	14%	24%	33%	21%	33%	19%
Cut-off base	14	07	22	08	06	33	14	14	24
Along with other data	55	75	32	78	65	22	43	33	19
Not at all	07	01	14	0	06	11	21	14	07
No response	02	0	03	0	0	0	0	05	07
(N=126)		67	59	50	17	9	14	21	15

42nd percentile. But the authors of that survey, after recognizing the "either/some/all" choices among several minimum requirements, said,

> Under these circumstances the summary data on colleges' reported minimum standards can be no more than a general indication of the extent and variety among colleges on this approach to the evaluation of applicants for admission.

The data for 1981 do not repeat those gathered in 1971 in all cases and in all details, but surely the similarities are of more significance than are the differences. Present RIC policies and practices of schools parallel the 1971 guidelines--not always for every school, of course--but substantially enough that it seemed necessary to look at the responses to only four of the 12 listed guidelines.

What Students, What Courses to Count?

Two of the four responses suggest that a bit of rewording or interpretation is necessary. The two deal with the students and the courses to be included in computing GPA and RIC. The other two responses touch on policy decisions that are more difficult to make and, in all probability, of more significance to students: differentiated weighting of marks in figuring GPA/RIC; and the recommended form for reporting rank-in-class. Since these four areas were known to be of concern to many school people when this study was being planned, questions about them were included in the collegiate inquiry form.

The guidelines recommend that all students at a given grade level be included in the ranked population (Guideline D), and that all marks on a student's record be used (Guideline F). In both cases those surveyed were asked what exceptions, if any, to a rigid interpretation of "all" are thought desirable by school people? And, what are collegiate preferences in this regard?

The extent of the exceptions taken to all students among the schools in the sample is summarized in Table 3. What that table does not show is the difference between public and nonpublic schools in kind as well as numbers. Among public schools almost all of the

"excluded" students were in some form of "special education" program, with the other mentions mostly related to some special feature of a particular school.

Table 3. Percent of Schools Reporting That They Include All Students in a Given Grade When Figuring Class Ranks

	(N)	%
Public	(196)	83%
Nonpublic	(47)	89
Combined	(243)	84%

But the nonpublic schools, with their predominantly college-prep focus, seldom serve student groups of the "special ed" sort, so it is not surprising that in these schools making exceptions to "all" is less frequent and when done, done for different reasons. The reasons were varied, but seem to be related more to the kind of educational experience of some students than to the competence of the students themselves; e.g., students entering after the tenth grade because of the difficulty of equating marks, students with extensive study abroad or in other off-campus programs.

Before looking at how colleges view this aspect of the GPA/RIC computing base, it will be helpful to see how schools react to the parallel recommendation; that is, that in figuring GPA/RIC all courses that carry graduation credit should be used. Table 4 shows the degree to which this recommendation describes present practice among secondary schools. The percentages for 1981 are higher than those for the 1971 sample, but it is probably more significant that about one in four of the schools currently takes some kind of exception to the all course recommendation.

Table 4. Percent of Schools Reporting They Use All Courses Applicable for Graduation in Computing GPA and RIC, Distributed by School Type

	(N)	%
Public	(199)	76%
Nonpublic	(47)	60
Combined	(246)	73%

Among the public schools in the sample, courses most often listed as excluded were physical education, driver education, and band/chorus. A few schools said they did not count such courses as those with "fractional credit" or carrying "minor credit." It is likely that many other schools make the same kind of exceptions but make them by not counting physical education, driver education, and so on toward graduation in the first place.

Responses from the nonpublic schools were much the same, though in many instances the nature of the exclusions can only be inferred from such comments as "academic only" or "majors only," or "only those with homework"!

There is no easy or satisfactory way to draft an amendment to cover the kinds of exclusions to "all students" or "all courses" illustrated here. One is tempted to propose something like "nonacademic," but that can be too sweeping, for who is to say that band, for instance, makes no demand on the intellect? The wiser course appears to be to continue the two guidelines as they are, recommending all students and courses, and allow individual schools to make such exceptions as they believe will better represent

their students' promise as college freshmen. This was the conclusion 10 years ago, too. However--and this is a most important proviso--when a school faculty does decide to make exception or exceptions, who and what are excluded from the "all" must be clearly defined in the information included with each student's transcript.

Colleges do have their preferences in this matter as can be judged by the figures in Tables 5 and 6, preferences that have not changed significantly in a decade. What is important in both of these tables is the frequency with which the "school's judgment" option is accepted, especially when the complete statement as it appeared in the questionnaire is taken into account: "...schools use own judgment but inform us of the base used."

Table 5. Relative Frequency of Collegiate Preferences for Courses To Be Used in Computing GPA and RIC

Courses Preferred for Inclusion in GPA/RIC	Total sample	Private	Public
All courses	17%	10%	24%
Academic only	44	58	27
All except...	02	01	03
School to use own judgment	36	28	36
No response	02	01	02
(N=126)		67	59

Table 6. Relative Frequency of Collegiate Preferences for Students To Be Included When Computing RIC

Students Preferred for Inclusion When Computing RIC	Total sample	Private	Public
All students	45%	48%	42%
Academic only	14	21	07
School to use own judgment	35	30	41
No response	06	01	06
(N=126)		67	59

It is evident that providing that kind of information as part of a student's transcript package is increasingly common; more than half of the schools contributing to this study sent along copies of the profiles they send to colleges. In all instances the profiles contained information about procedures for computing grade point averages and class ranks, most often in simple, straightforward two-page form, as NASSP urged in its 1977 pamphlet Guidelines for Designing a School Profile. Surely, more than half of all schools now prepare such factual documents, but their significance in the work of college admissions offices and in the educational lives of students warrants that they be unanimously adopted.

All Equal or Not?

Of all the issues raised by the GPA/RIC computing operation, the one most likely to stimulate debate, at least among school staff members, is whether or not to employ differential weighting of marks in figuring grade point averages and, hence, class ranks. In 1971, NASSP came out in favor of weighting, but only "suggesting" its adoption if a school found it to contribute to the making of fairer academic peer comparisons. That 1971 position is Guideline G in the appended listing.

Table 7. Percentage of Schools in the Sample That Use Some Form of Differential Weighting of Marks in Computing GPA

	(N)	%
Public	(195)	45%
Nonpublic	(47)	57
Combined	(242)	48%

About half the schools queried in 1981 are following that suggestion and the other half are not. As for collegiate preferences in this matter, it appears that admissions officers in private colleges and universities lean toward differential weighting more noticeably than their counterparts in public institutions. The more striking figures in Table 8, however, are the sizeable number of both types of colleges that stated they are willing to live with whatever pattern a school selects, but they do want to know what that pattern is.

Table 8. Frequency of Collegiate Preferences Regarding the Weighting of Marks in Computing RIC

College Preference	Total sample	All private	All public	By Type and Undergraduate Enrollment					
				Private		Public			
				-5M	5M+	-5M	5-10M	10-20M	20M+
Weight all equally	16%	10%	22%	12%	06%	56%	21%	14%	13%
Weighting to distinguish academic demands	34	45	22	42	53	33	28	14	20
School to use own judgment	44	43	46	46	35	11	36	57	06
No response	06	01	06	0	06	0	14	14	07
(N=126)		67	59	50	17	9	14	21	15

Of all the reasons given by the "do not weight" schools for their position, the most frequent one--expressed in various ways--was "Our present practice seems satisfactory." There were other explanations, of course; for instance, "school district policy," "parental pressure," "influence on student choices when some courses are made to seem more important than others--and influence on faculty morale, too," and "Who is to say?"

The inability of the faculty to agree on a weighting scale or plan has been a deterrent in several other cases, an explanation often accompanied by an expressed desire for a definitive plan that schools could adopt.

These issues are not impossible to overcome when in a school's judgment some form of differential weighting "will provide a more truthful representation of its students'

academic accomplishments and prospects." For example, 67 of the sample schools reported they had made some changes in their practices relating to RIC in the last 10 years, and in 33 instances that change was to introduce weighting or to modify former procedures in this regard. The process can work the other way, too; witness the five schools that had discontinued weighting since 1971. The report of the 1971 survey not only was clear on the point that "Whether or not to employ differential weighting should be a given school's decision to make," but stated equally clearly that

> The plan of weighting, if any, should be carefully checked from time to time locally to make certain that it continues to do what it was established to do.

Both the changes to weighting and away from it are evidence that schools are taking this monitoring responsibility with increasing seriousness. And although that injunction seems to be aimed at schools that are employing some form of differential weighting of marks, it ought also to be kept in mind by those who are not.

Finally, it is no more possible or desirable in 1981 than it was in 1971 to recommend a common schedule for differentiating among courses, beyond "Keep the plan simple."

Alternatives to the Traditional

The customary form for reporting class rank has been a common fraction or its equivalent--15/347 or 235 in 619. This is still the usual form, as the data in Table 9 show. Incidentally, the numbers and percentages in this Table are based on schools that

Table 9. Proportion of Schools in the Sample That Compute RIC and Report that Rank in Common-Fraction or Equivalent Form

	(N)	%
Public	(157)	73%
Nonpublic	(39)	77
Combined	(196)	74%

(1) do compute RIC; and (2) provided quantifiable data in responding to the question about their RIC form. The responses that could not be used suggested that that question had not been phrased as clearly as it might have been. However, from other internal evidence it seems unlikely that the percentages would have been changed in any important degree if data from all computing schools could have been used.

Obviously, the recommendation contained in Guideline I, that percentiles be used instead of the traditional fractional form, has not been as persuasive as its framers had hoped it would be. Not without some influence, to be sure, for about a quarter of all the schools sampled are reporting a student's class standing as the percentile or decile, or quartile, or quintile, of the class in which the grade point average belongs. A few of these, it is worth noting, have worked out patterns that take into account both student needs and local realities--for example, the school that reports class ranks by deciles except that it provides the traditional rank-order numbers for the top 10 students.

The reasons for making the recommendation in 1971 are the same in 1981--the overvaluing of small and insignificant differences between nearby fractions that are constructed from marks which everyone knows have their own standard errors of measurement, not to mention the educational and social consequences of a system under which "if a student is to improve his own standing someone else's must be diminished."

Where college admissions officers stand on the use of the usual fractions is a matter of consequence to schools that are considering going to an alternative form of reporting RIC. How free are secondary schools to shift to percentiles or deciles without handicapping the admissions process for their students? To get an idea of the extent of this freedom, college admissions officers were asked whether they would be willing to accept three alternatives to RIC fractions. Their replies are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10. Percent of Colleges Using Rank-in-Class Willing To Accept Various Alternatives to the Customary Fractional Form

Willing to accept:	Total sample	Private	Public
Percentile	93%	95%	90%
Decile	82	86	76
Quintile	69	68	70
(N=117)		66	51

Eagerness does not always accompany that willingness, for a number of admissions officers added, "but we'd rather have a numerical rank." Still, schools that wish to revise the form in which they present student ranks need not feel seriously handicapped by college demands.

Final Comment

Generally, the 1971 RIC Guidelines are still valid and pertinent. There is at least one important way in which the picture has changed, at least in degree, during the last decade--a change which seems to make the guidelines more rather than less appropriate. At several points as this discussion has moved along attention was called to the evident willingness by many colleges to have schools "use their own judgment." The report on the acceptability of alternative forms for expressing class rank is a case in point. By no means are colleges abandoning the right and privilege of making their own

requirements, but it is evident that much more than in years past there is an openness in college admissions offices to variations from those requirements that a school believes will benefit its students. Schools that have hesitated to depart from tradition should be assured that in substantially all college admissions offices thoughtfully determined departures will receive an attentive hearing.

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Guidelines as Listed in the School Questionnaire

Guideline A — Secondary schools should continue to compute grade point averages as one element in the college application process.

Guideline B — Secondary schools should provide rank-in-class for those colleges that require it as part of their admissions process.

Guideline C — In computing grade point averages/rank-in-class, schools should include marks from all courses that are applicable toward graduation.

Guideline D — In computing rank-in-class (if computed) all students at a given grade level should be included.

Guideline E — In computing grade point averages, only courses with "traditional" marks should be used, excluding those marked pass/fail, credit/no credit, etc.

Guideline F — In computing grade point average/rank-in-class, all marks on a student's record--including failing marks, repeated courses, etc.--should be used.

Guideline G — When courses differ substantially in academic challenge, differential weighting for computing grade point average is suggested as a means for assessing student achievement more fairly, with the weight plan included on the transcript.

Guideline H — For college admissions purposes, computing a cumulative rank-in-class at the end of the eleventh grade and at the end of the first semester of the twelfth grade should be sufficient.

Guideline I — All ranks should be reported on transcripts (when and if reported) in the form of whole-number percentiles, along with class size.

Guideline J Methods used to compute grade point averages and class ranks should be told to transcript recipients, parents, and students.

Guideline K What class rank, if any, is entered on a student's transcript should be available to the student and the student's parents.

Guideline L Rank-in-class information should be released only (1) to appropriate school personnel; (2) at the request or consent of the student; or (3) in response to formal legal processes.

KUDOS.....A review of this kind is impossible without assistance from schools and colleges, and assistance was provided fully and promptly by several hundred secondary school and college staff members. It is hoped that the use to which their information has been put will seem to them to have made their efforts worthwhile. In addition it should be said that many of the thoughtful suggestions and comments that were offered could not be addressed in this discussion, but the School-College Relations Committee is putting those on its study agenda for the months ahead. Assistance in this project was also provided by AACRAO, the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), and the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS).

The director of publications wishes to join with the School-College Relations Committee in acknowledging the work of Warren Seyfert, who not only prepared this report, but also directed the Rank-in-Class Study for the Committee as he did in 1971.

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